

The Corps of Royal Canadian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Among The Water Rats RCEME after D-Day

Transcript of an Interview with Alvin Coughlin (3rd Canadian Division, 7th Infantry Brigade Workshop, RCEME)



The RCEME Heritage Archives



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AMONG THE WATER RATS
INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT- ALVIN (AL) COUGHLIN
(3rd Cdn Div, 7th Infantry Brigade Workshop, RCME on D-Day)

INTRO

This interview was conducted by Sgt Anthony (Tony) Beresford of the EME Branch Heritage Project during the RCME A 25th Anniversary at McNaughton Barracks, Camp Barriefield, Kingston Ontario Jun 03. Sgt Beresford was an FCS Tech instructing at CFSEME, Camp Borden in Regimental Company and is the EME Branch Heritage Collection Administrator. This interview was transcribed from tape, with a large contribution by Pte Ruff of PRETC. The sequence has been edited slightly for continuity. Bracketed notes are Sgt Beresford's as clarifying addendums.

BACKGROUND

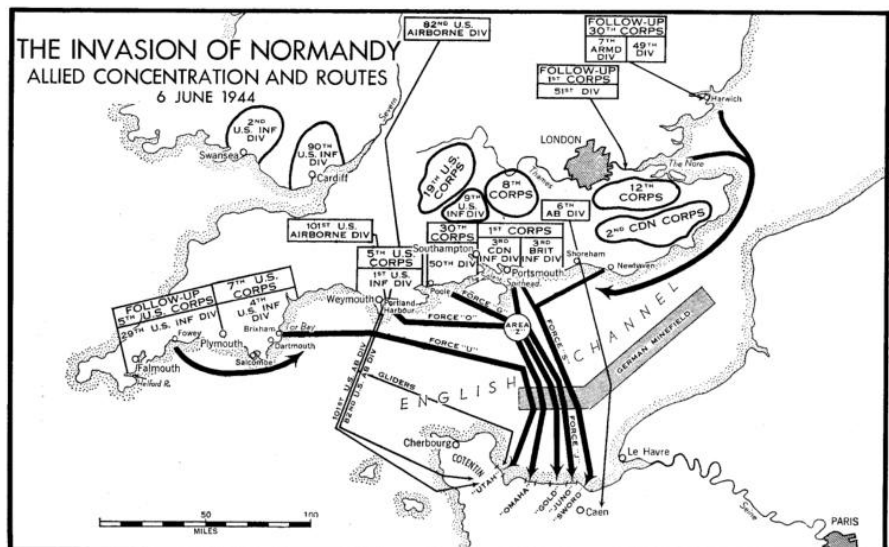
Juno Beach - The Canadians On D-Day

<http://www.members.shaw.ca/junobeach/index.htm>

The first formation named Third Canadian Division took the field during the First World War as part of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. The Division covered itself with glory in several hard fought campaigns, and was disbanded at the end of the War. Originally distinguished by black Battle Patches on their sleeves, the Division eventually adopted a three-inch by two-inch "French-grey" coloured formation badge.

In September 1939, the First and Second Divisions of the Canadian Active Service Force were mobilized. In May 1940, the crisis in France led the Canadian Government to approve the raising of additional divisions, and the Third and Fourth Divisions, CASF, were mobilized according to General Order 184/40, effective 24 May 1940. Each infantry battalion of the Third Division was designated by the name of the Regiment that had raised it, with the suffix "CASF" added. Technically, the battalions of the Third Division were separate from their Regiments. These Regiments also retained battalions at home as part of the Non-Permanent Active Militia. The NPAM units trained on weekends and weeknights, and consisted of men not able to serve with the CASF.

The enlistment of the Canadian troops into the regiments began in early 1940. They were ordinary people who came from the farming communities, small towns, the factories, and the inner cities from all across Canada. They were the true citizen soldiers of World War II. Some enlisted for patriotism, some for adventure but the majority, because it just seemed to be the right thing to do. They had followed the events in Europe over the last few years and understood the evil that Hitler and Nazi Germany represented. They would fight to end this great evil and bring peace to Europe. On D-Day these citizen soldiers were the spearhead of the Allied invasion of Europe. The Allied D-Day plan relied entirely on each of the regiments to achieve their specific objectives. Within the regiments the Canadian soldiers were determined not to let each other down. They depended on each other - and the free world depended on them.



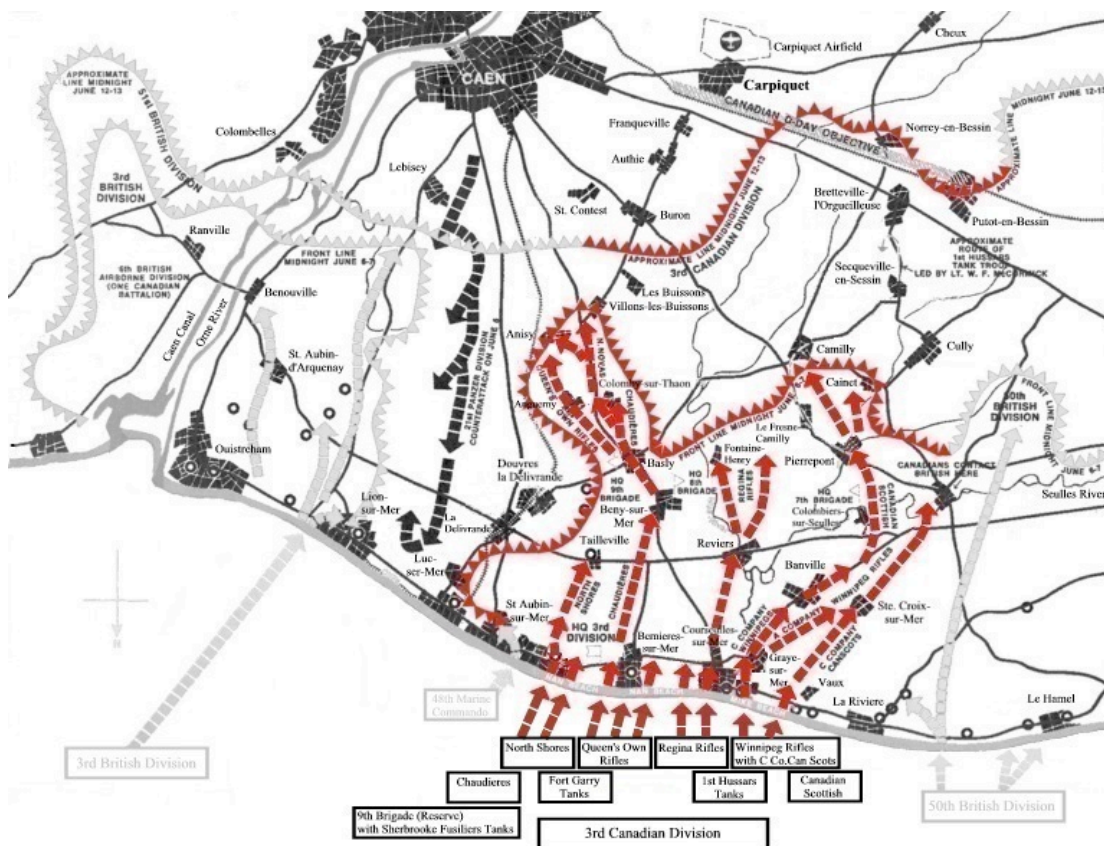
On D-Day (the first day of the invasion), the Canadians were to land at Juno beach in the centre of Second British Army's sector. The plan called for the Canadians to establish a beachhead, capture the three small seaside towns, and advance ten miles inland. Their objective was to cut the Caen -Bayeux highway, seize the Carpiquet airport west of Caen, and form a link between the British beachheads Sword and Gold. The British were to capture the pivotal city of Caen on the left of the Canadians. The challenge facing the Canadians was to overcome the coastal defences and capture ground positions that could be defended against German counter attacks. The assault was a formidable task for the Canadians as the Germans had turned the coastline into a continuous fortress of guns, pillboxes, wire, mines and beach obstacles.

The 3rd Canadian Infantry Division supported by the 2nd Canadian Armoured Brigade would land on Juno beach in brigade groups. Two brigades would land in the initial assault followed later by the reserve brigade, which would pass through the lead brigades on to the divisional objectives. More than 20,000 men, 200 tanks and hundreds of other vehicles were under the command of Major-General Keller. The original H hour was 7:35 for the 7th Brigade and 7:45 for the 8th Brigade. DD tanks would land 5 minutes before H hour and at H hour itself 2 LCT groups carrying AVRE's, tanks and armoured bulldozers would land and clear beach exits. The infantry would land at H plus 5 when the tanks and engineers had cleared the obstacles and overcome the opposition. Reserve companies would land at H plus 20.

The invasion was set for dawn on June 5, 1944, the hour and day when the tides would be most favourable. Bad weather forced a one-day postponement and still the storm raged. On June 5, at 4:15 the Supreme Allied Commander, General Dwight D. Eisenhower listened to the final comments of his advisors, paused, then said: "Okay. We'll go". With that decision a vast array of 5300 ships and landing craft carrying 150,000 men, 1500 tanks, and 50,000 vehicles prepared to move into place for the invasion. A head lay what Winston Churchill called "the most difficult and complicated operation that has ever taken place" - June the 6th, 1944 - D-Day.

The Arrival of 7 Infantry Brigade Workshop (Exerpt from 'Canada's Craftsmen')

Major RG Storms' 7 Infantry Brigade Workshop was scheduled to move to France in 5 groups and commence on D + 3. Capt WJ Sutherland and 19 men had left their unit earlier to start training on the 12th of April with 23 BRS at East Strand, West Wittering. They were to be released to return to their unit when the beach situation permitted. Storms with 40 men and 12 vehicles sailed on the night of the 10th of June on an LST instead of the LCT they expected, after a delay in loading caused by a broken hoist. The following morning, with the coast of France in sight, German "E Boats" attacked their convoy. A torpedo narrowly missed their ship. After the attack was driven off, the convoy dropped anchor off Mike Beach. They made a dry landing at 5 PM on the 11th. Capt's AM Mulligan, GA Charett, LT I Malcolm, 58 men and 23 vehicles arrived later than their schedule D + 4 date. LT JL Laing, 37 men and 14 vehicles scheduled for D + 6 landed on the 15th of June. The rear party or residues arrived in two sections of 9 men and 2 vehicles on the 14th, and 20 men and 17 vehicles on the 22nd of July thus completing the move of the unit from England to France.











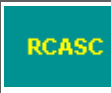


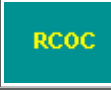















Third Canadian Division Order of Battle 1944-1945

<http://www.canadiansoldiers.com/>
Michael A. Dorosh, CD



	The Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa (M.G.) (Third Canadian Division Support Battalion)		Royal Canadian Corps of Signals Third Infantry Divisional Signals, RCCS																																				
 	Seventh Canadian Infantry Brigade The Royal Winnipeg Rifles The Regina Rifle Regiment 1st Battalion, The Canadian Scottish Regiment		Canadian Provost Corps One provost company.																																				
 	Eighth Canadian Infantry Brigade The Queen's Own Rifles of Canada Le Régiment de la Chaudière The North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment		Canadian Postal Corps One divisional postal unit.																																				
 	Ninth Canadian Infantry Brigade The Highland Light Infantry of Canada The Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry Highlanders The North Nova Scotia Highlanders		Royal Canadian Army Service Corps Headquarters RCASC 7th Infantry Brigade Company, RCASC 8th Infantry Brigade Company, RCASC 9th Infantry Brigade Company, RCASC Third Infantry Divisional Troops Company, RCASC																																				
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	Royal Canadian Artillery Headquarters, Third Divisional Artillery, RCA		Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps No. 14 Field Ambulance, RCAMC No. 22 Field Ambulance, RCAMC No. 23 Field Ambulance, RCAMC Third Division Field Hygiene Section, RCAMC Two field dressing stations																																				
	12th Field Regiment 11th (Hamilton) Field Battery 16th Field Battery 43rd Field Battery																																						
	13th Field Regiment 22nd Field Battery 78th Field Battery 44th Field Battery		Royal Canadian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers																																				
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	Corps of Royal Canadian Engineers Headquarters RCE Third Field Park Company, RCE 6th Field Company, RCE 16th Field Company, RCE 18th Field Company, RCE One bridge platoon	 	<table><thead><tr><th>UNIT</th><th>ARRIVAL</th></tr></thead><tbody><tr><td>Headquarters CREME</td><td>D + 1</td></tr><tr><td>7th Infantry Brigade Workshop, RCEME</td><td>D + 2</td></tr><tr><td>8th Infantry Brigade Workshop, RCEME</td><td>D + 2</td></tr><tr><td>9th Infantry Brigade Workshop, RCEME</td><td>D + 2</td></tr><tr><td>4 LAA workshop</td><td>D + 1 (PM)</td></tr><tr><td>6 Light Aid Detachment (CH of O)</td><td>JUL 12</td></tr><tr><td>12 Light Aid Detachment (19 FD REGT)</td><td>D + 1</td></tr><tr><td>30 Light Aid Detachment (3 FD PK)</td><td>JUN 16</td></tr><tr><td>31 Light Aid Detachment (3 DIV SIGS)</td><td>D + 2</td></tr><tr><td>32 Light Aid Detachment (12 FD REGT)</td><td>D + 2</td></tr><tr><td>33 Light Aid Detachment (13 FD REGT)</td><td>D + 2</td></tr><tr><td>34 Light Aid Detachment (14 FD REGT)</td><td>D (H + 3)</td></tr><tr><td>35 Light Aid Detachment (3 AT REGT)</td><td>D</td></tr><tr><td>36 Light Aid Detachment (HQ 7 INF BGDE)</td><td>D</td></tr><tr><td>37 Light Aid Detachment (HQ 8 INF BGDE)</td><td>D (H + 7)</td></tr><tr><td>38 Light Aid Detachment (HQ 9 INF BGDE)</td><td>D</td></tr><tr><td>62 Light Aid Detachment (7 RECCE REGT)</td><td>D + 1 (0300)</td></tr></tbody></table>	UNIT	ARRIVAL	Headquarters CREME	D + 1	7th Infantry Brigade Workshop, RCEME	D + 2	8th Infantry Brigade Workshop, RCEME	D + 2	9th Infantry Brigade Workshop, RCEME	D + 2	4 LAA workshop	D + 1 (PM)	6 Light Aid Detachment (CH of O)	JUL 12	12 Light Aid Detachment (19 FD REGT)	D + 1	30 Light Aid Detachment (3 FD PK)	JUN 16	31 Light Aid Detachment (3 DIV SIGS)	D + 2	32 Light Aid Detachment (12 FD REGT)	D + 2	33 Light Aid Detachment (13 FD REGT)	D + 2	34 Light Aid Detachment (14 FD REGT)	D (H + 3)	35 Light Aid Detachment (3 AT REGT)	D	36 Light Aid Detachment (HQ 7 INF BGDE)	D	37 Light Aid Detachment (HQ 8 INF BGDE)	D (H + 7)	38 Light Aid Detachment (HQ 9 INF BGDE)	D	62 Light Aid Detachment (7 RECCE REGT)	D + 1 (0300)
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FORMALITIES

EME BR HER (E)- I am talking to Alvin Coughlin

MR AL COUGHLIN (A)- *Coughlin. Like Mac Coughlin, Commonly known as Al*

E- When you left the service what rank were you then?

A- *I was a Warrant Officer Class 2*

E- And you currently reside in Carlton Place, Ontario you said?

A- *Yeah, I live in Carlton Place right now.*

E- What we are going to talk about is; Al was in the landings of Juno Beach on D plus 2, I think you said?

A- *Yeah 2 or 3 I can't recall which.*

E- So we are going to talk about what he went through as a..., what rank were you at the time?

I was a Craftsman.

E- Did you have any family back in Canada, kids?

No, I was single at the time. I was born in Smith Falls, joined up in Ottawa in 41 right in the Regular Force. I joined as a Royal Canadian Engineer and finished basic in Petawawa in 41 and decided I wanted to get into the electrical trade. They pulled me out and sent me to with a group to Peterborough Collegiate Institute (No. 32 Training Center) for three months taught by civilian instructors, then moved on to Hamilton to the Canadian Army Trade School (CATS formed in 1941 at the Libby Owen Plant on Kenilworth Avenue North. This school trained electricians, blacksmiths, machinists, cooks, carpenters, bricklayers, wireless mechanics, motor mechanics, armourers, artificers, and textile refitters. By 1944 15,000 had trained there. It was closed in 1946.) Moved from there to Kingston, then a short shot in Ottawa, then went overseas to England in 42.

E- As a young Craftsman on D Day plus 2 or 3, and what it appeared to be from his point of view, what were your first impressions? You were on the troop ship for a while I take it.

The thing was, on the morning of D-Day we were in the marshalling area, they took us out, and they had pre loaded the vehicles, heavy equipment vehicles in landing ship tank, the LST(photo <http://www.lstmemorial.org/>), which were American ships, and they put us aboard the landing ship with the vehicles, and we went out and sat in the English channel until the beaches were suitable to get the vehicles ashore. Aboard that American landing ship, we were on American rations. Wasn't that a treat, those old Canadian rations, I can still remember the canned mixed fruit, those were my favourite.

E- The weather was pretty bad to start with wasn't it?

It was, the weather was bad, and we sat out there over, I believe I know, we were over night one night, possibly two nights just sitting in the channel. The German planes that were getting through didn't like the looks of us very much. We had a lot of anti aircraft fire stuff around.

E- A lot of threats from submarines at that point or did they keep them out for you?

I don't think they got into the English Channel.

E- I know the Navy ran a pretty good screen at the time because they had all those Tribal Class Destroyers.



It was pretty good at the time, out side of the aircraft that got through there wasn't much action out there at all. But eventually late afternoon D plus 2 we got inside and made our way towards the Juno Beach area, and just about dusk the tide was right and they brought the landing ship in at tide up, and the vehicles were taken off and we got off. By the time we got a shore it was dusk and that night there is always some German planes.

E- The beach was not under fire anymore?

No the beach wasn't under fire, the beach was clear and we were not under fire anymore. We got in there and got the things the next day we started to establish the sections and workshops, cause we had on D plus 1, we had an advance group had gone in ahead of us to set up base.

E- Where did you set up at, do you remember the town?

That is why I wish I would have know this ahead of time, I have record of this at home. I got the archives when I went to Port Amerisha(?) Holland I went to the archives and got the name of the places but it was very close and we didn't get in very far for a couple of days. Pretty well got in the first ten days we were moving pretty often, but forward, but we became pretty well set pretty much just in advance of the Carpiquet airfield.

E- Who were you serving with at the time? What was the name of the unit?

The unit was 7 Canadian Inf Bgde Workshop. And I was the tele communication section, we had the base shop with the larger vehicle with repair section where we did all the calibrations and repair on the wireless radio and switch board equipment.

E- So back then the RCME's pretty much took care of the field radios?

Yeah on the first and second line repair. At that level we did know how.

E- So it would be sent back to England?

Eventually at the unit we got an advance space workshop set up but prior to that it would go back to England.

E- What was a normal day like for you? I guess when the shop got set up it was hard for the Germans to get through like they use to?



No, No, things were pretty stable around the main workshop. Up at 6:30 or 7:00 work through have breakfast, lunch.

E- Did you find the equipment you were repairing, was it pretty reliable stuff for the time, for the age and technology?

For the age and technology it was designed to be rugged! It seemed to be suitable. The Wireless Set No. 19 was the standby radio on the mobile equipment, (19 Set History <http://www.qsl.net/ve3bdb/history.html> The heritage room has a lend lease model on display donated by Cpl Carpenter.) for tanks, carriers. The 18 I believe, was a backpack version. Field phones too, the Don Mark 5 D for Don in the old phonetic alphabet.

E- Sentry duties?

Yeah everyone had sentry

E- Full defence, like you were dug in?

Oh yeah! Dug in, basically most time we dug slim trenches, slept in them or jumped in them.



E- How did you find digging them, was it pretty good? Lots of rocks?

No it wasn't, it was pretty easy. In Normandy

E-Did the shop move again?

Oh yes we followed the 7th Inf brigade. They were the assault. They were the assault brigade.

E- Do you remember the units there?

A- There was the Canadian Scottish, The Royal Winnipeg Rifles, The Regina Rifles. That was the three, the machine gun support was from Cameron Highlander in Ottawa, and the Recce was the 7th Duke of Yorks out of Montreal.

E-I know their battle records pretty good so I know there was pretty heavy fighting for those guys. The equipment you were getting back was there a lot of battle damage to it or mostly out of use?

Basically it was usage. Most of the battle damage was already on back load.

E- Did you find that the guys were using it pretty good? They were not abusing it?

They had signals people with the infantry so the equipment was well taken care of.

E- Any other highlights you can remember that are significant?

One incident, when we got close to the airfield, see, we had with the telecommunication section. But we did take out a group, maybe three or four of us, with a smaller vehicle and test equipment. We went forward to the Brigade Aid, we call it, and also to the headquarters of the infantry units, and any of the bad equipment they had, they would load it, and we would go and repair, it was called a forward repair.

E- So you have been lets say ten kilometres away from the frontlines?

Sometimes closer, not terribly close, but also by that time (General) Montgomery was know for his artillery base they set up near the Carpiquet airfield (National Archives painting by Charles Comfort). Big area of artillery! We were there and they had a barrage start at 10:00 or 11:00 o'clock at night and this went on and on and on and on, both ways, and we had radio sets laid out on the ground and some of them hit the ones on the ground. The next morning I woke up with a concussion from all that. All the filaments from the radios all the tubes broke.



E- we used tube radio all the way up to 1975-1980.

It is funny recollection that you have of it.

E- Any other things you can remember like leave in London, leave in Europe, highlights to visiting places that you remember, things were pretty dead and beat up this time in Europe?

Yeah at Caen we had such, I recall going over and ending up..... this is not a pleasant thing.... After Caen was taken and we got through Caen there was a place called Ifs (?). We came to a field, there had been a battle across that field and there was a lot of things left, the bodies were picked up, but the Germans were still there after they killed themselves, and workshop personal, after we landed there, they took us out and we buried the Germans. Hung up idents and stuff like that, we did a roll call we had one of our clerks up in Whishet(?), and he was with us digging, and he hit a mine and they had to take him out. We lost him. Got up into Holland, the workshop itself got shelled a few of times we lost a few, nobody killed, but we lost three or four people that had to be evacuated cause of the shelling with the casualties.

E- So the Shell Scraps were an important thing to have to jump into.

Yeah the scraps were good.

E- So you dug straight down.

Yeah we dug straight down cause we didn't stay in one place that often it was a mobile workshop.

E- It was worth digging

You didn't have to dig that deep, just enough to get down and cover your head you were laughing.

E- The equipment you were issued your personal kit did you find that it was pretty decent stuff or did you find that

- It was pretty decent we had our own personal weapon the (.303 Lee- Enfield) rifle; it was pretty accurate at that time. Now from my recollection I don't think that many of us had to use a rifle at all, at the defence.

E- Guys infiltrating around, like any snipers, or anything like that or only pot shots?

Only one pot shot I can recall in France two or three weeks after the landing near Caen. The favourite position for a sniper was in a church tower, some place like that some place high. Me and a couple of guys decided to take a walk to the fields we were just all going to walk around there but the shots, one whistled past me and landed on the ground by me. Most of those guys didn't last very long. The Infantry would get a line on them and take care of them.

E- Was an infantry company or section or attached to your Workshop for defence, or were you on your own?

No, we were well on our own.

E- The other MRT's that you had, on the Vehicle side, they went out pretty far?

The Forward Repair Platoon, oh yeah!

E- Do you remember any guys that stood out in your mind, for the Military Cross, or anything like that?

Oh, not really. We were all just your "run of the mill" mechanics. We just had to do what we had to do. When we got up to Belgium, it wasn't too hard. The only thing that I really remember is that we got near a town called Wingonee(?) and some of the guys discovered an ice-cream parlour in town, and we hadn't had ice-cream since we left Canada. I'll tell you, that was the biggest treat of the trip, just to get some ice-cream. Then we went up into Holland.

E- I take it the locals were pretty glad to see you all through there?

France, Belgium, Holland we got in November 44, we got right through Holland, up and down. We stayed in downtown Nimegan that winter. We set up in what had been, I don't know, an assembly plant or something like that. The only excitement we had there was between Christmas or New Years during the Battle of the Bulge, the Germans were flying fighters in and doing reconnaissance...

E- And the Germans had guys in the rear in Allied Uniforms...

Yeah, and all the guys were out on roll call between the sleeping and quarters to get our daily troop information and German plane came in and bounced a few across the parade square, a little bit of scattering done there!

E- Nijmegen was the place they called "The Bridge Too Far" where the Para's dropped in.

Yeah, that was where they jumped at Arnhem. The Nijmegen bridge was the difficulty. We were in site of the bridge then we left there and headed for the German border. It was just in time for my first leave at Easter so I headed back to England for a week or two.

E- London?

No, I went up to Blackpool, near Lancashire, I had some people up there I had made acquaintance with and they'd asked me back. That was a nice place, one of England's summer resorts.

E- Not a lot of damage from aircraft?

No, not that part of England.

E- I'm taking it you stayed in Germany after to the end of the war. Were you part of the occupying forces?

No, I didn't stay. I got moved at the end of the war; we were at a cave when word came through. We moved back to Holland the broke our Brigade up. And posted those of us who hadn't volunteered for the war in the Pacific to 1 Div, the First Canadian Division RCEME Units for repatriation in May. They sent us to England. I didn't get home until 23 Oct 1945. Some guys weren't happy but being single it didn't matter. I got out for 18 months and went to Ryerson in Toronto for electronics. I took Industrial Electronics.

I had a short-term job and met op with my old Staff Sergeant. He said he had a Corporal's vacancy for me so I got back in the fall of '47. I had got married in '46 to a girl from Toronto. I was posted to the old Workshop at the old Ford plant in Toronto at the end of the Danfourth '47 and was moved quickly to the camp out at Malton (Toronto International Airport) until '50. I was selected for my Artificer's course for a year then went to the west coast and was bounced around until '54 returned to Kingston posted to the Radiation Detection Unit. I was with the first group of Canadians to go to the Atomic Bomb trials in Nevada.

I was there for two months and saw 5 or 6 of the balloons go up. It was quit the experience! I came back and was posted in '58 to Valcartier to get my bilingual instructors qualification. I returned, was promoted and sent to the Base Workshop. I was posted to Petawawa's Base Workshop in '60-61, went to Egypt for a year Gaza, Rafa, returned to 2 Inf Bgde Workshop and retired in May '67.

Afterward I worked for the engineering branch of the county post office. When I reached 60 I retired from the Public Service. Afterwards I worked as a consultant. I am proud to say I am still computer illiterate.

Reunions like this are very important to me. I've only missed one in the 25 years.

E- So the comradeships you made in the RCEME you've carried on.

Yes, I've met my old friends all over. My son Paul also joined the RCEME as an ELM apprentice and was an instructor in Kingston in the early '80's. The reunions are always a good time.

E- Well, thanks Al for this interesting interview. I look forward to seeing you again next year.



Infantry, near Nijmegen by Alex Colville (12172)
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